




Speech By
Hon. Dr Steven Miles

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBA

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**WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Hon. SJ MILES** (Murrumba—ALP) (Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development, Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning) (11.52 am): I rise to support the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. Queensland's first responders put their lives on the line every single day to keep Queenslanders safe. For them, their jobs are more than just a pay cheque. While I was health minister for three years I met a lot of ambulance officers—I even got to ride along with a few—so I have seen firsthand how they pour their heart and soul into their work.

I have also seen firsthand just how grateful Queenslanders are when they are in that moment of need and that teal uniform shows up. I know that most Queenslanders want to know that their government is doing all it can to support these vital workers. Our first responders face the very real possibility of being hurt or worse. They know this; their loved ones know this. If they are hurt, sometimes their injuries are not visible. We all know the term 'fight or flight'. Sufferers of PTSD can feel that sensation constantly, even when there is no threat. This can lead to nightmares, flashbacks and difficulty with change or self-expression.

Researchers are continuing to determine exactly how PTSD affects the brain. PTSD victims lose volume in the hippocampus due to elevated stress hormones. As a result, they may have trouble telling the difference between the past and present, leading them to avoid situations that remind them of their trauma. It would be a horrible way to live.

Most Queensland workers can come home from work and switch off. Our first responders often see things unimaginable to many Queenslanders. Many of them are haunted by images of what they have seen while at work. It is no surprise that many struggle with PTSD. One in 10 first responders likely have PTSD, with five per cent experiencing suicidal thoughts in the last year. Traditionally, when they have gone to get help they have encountered a stigma associated with mental health care. This has been a significant barrier. The workplace culture of simply 'manning up' stops many more from accessing the help they need and they deserve. The process of demonstrating that their PTSD was a direct result of their work is another hurdle which often puts the support they need out of reach. As a government, we should be doing everything we can to make that mental health care more accessible. This is what this bill seeks to do.

As it stands, first responders must jump through those hurdles to access workers compensation for PTSD, made all the more difficult by the fact that these injuries are invisible. There are no visible wounds, no cuts, no bruises, no broken bones, but the damage is there and it needs to be treated. In order to access compensation, these workers must currently demonstrate that their PTSD was caused by their work. This bill, if passed by the House today, will reverse the onus, with PTSD being presumed to be work related unless proved otherwise.

During the pandemic, our first responders have gone above and beyond the call of duty, making unbelievable sacrifices in Queensland's battle against the pandemic while also doing their day job: the police who were at the border, keeping Queenslanders safe and keeping the virus out of our state; the paramedics who have transported COVID-positive patients, keeping them safe and removing the virus from the community; the firefighters who have diligently gotten on with their job, fighting record bushfire season after record bushfire season while also supporting Queensland's pandemic efforts and always being ready to travel to other states to help them fight their bushfires; and the often unsung heroes, the emergency despatchers who are the first to take the call and the first to take action. If any of these heroes were injured in the line of duty, we would be mortified to see them have to demonstrate that their injuries were incurred from their work. It is time to treat PTSD as if it was any other injury sustained by our first responders.

I thank the member for McConnel for being the driving force in this parliament to make these changes. As Minister for Industrial Relations, she has placed the safety of workers at the forefront again and again, and again today. I also know that the member for Morayfield, the Minister for Police, has worked very closely with her and with the Police Union to prepare these laws in a way that will ensure that our Police Service and our police officers are protected and get the protection that we intend for them.

Some members will have been surprised to learn this week that the member for Thuringowa used to be a paramedic! I thank him for the contribution he was able to make, drawing on all of that experience, and for his constant and unwavering support of our first responders, and acknowledge that he is now again one, still doing some shifts up there in Kirwan.

I also acknowledge the member for Barron River's deeply personal contribution. I knew both the member for Thuringowa and the member for Barron River as ambos before any of us were in this place. While I knew of some of their experiences, many of us have been moved by hearing about them in this debate. Unfortunately, we heard, the member for Barron River knows better than most the horrific scenes first responders encounter when they respond to incidents. I think they both demonstrated why we need to change the act to better provide for our first responders.

Finally, I want to thank each and every one of Queensland's first responders. Every single day they save lives and protect Queenslanders. We all owe them a debt of gratitude. I hope that this bill sees fewer first responders take their own lives and that fewer families have to suffer the tragic loss of a loved one because they could not access the help they needed in a timely and easy fashion.

On this side of the House we will always put workers first—their safety being among our highest priority. We rightly expect that when our paramedics, police and firefighters arrive on the scene of tragic accidents they have the right equipment. We should also expect that when they come back, they have all the equipment they need to recover. That is precisely what this bill intends to do. It is what motivated our government to bring it forward. It will, I believe, make a very big difference to the lives of Queensland's first responders. I am sure it will be welcomed by them and by the community that they serve. I commend the bill to the House.